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175TH ANNIVERSARY — FEATURES

Who are the people who made up Winchester?

ELLEN KNIGHT | CORRESPONDENT

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Men of Winchester dressed as Puritans for the settlement's 250th Anniversary. COURTESY PHOTO/THE WINCHESTER ARCHIVAL CENTER

When the first British colonists arrived in New England during the 17th century, the native inhabitants of the area now incorporated into of Winchester were members of the Massachusett tribe. The origi

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colonists were Puritans led by Gov. John Winthrop. The first colonial town to which Winchester territory belonged was Charlestown. It is with these three entities that the history of Winchester began.

Following some early settlements on Cape Ann and at Salem, the Massachusetts Bay Company organized the great Puritan migration from England to New England (1629-1642).

"Purchase of Land from the Indians" or "The Beginning of Winchester" mural by Aiden Lasalle Ripley installed in 1934 at the Winchester Public Library, funded under the Arts Projects Division of the Public Works Administration

The central portion of a mural at the Winchester Pubic Library entitled 'The Beginning of Winchester' or 'Purchase of Land from the Indians.' COURTESY PHOTO/THE WINCHESTER ARCHIVAL CENTER

The first fleet brought enough settlers to Salem that the Puritan colonists began to move to others areas. Charlestown was first settled in 1629. The fleet of 1630 included 11 ships which brought about 1,000 settlers to the Massachusetts Bay.

In this fleet was the Arbella, which carried the first governor, John Winthrop, and the company's charter. Although the Arbella landed at Salem, the people quickly dispersed to Charlestown, Boston, and nearby lands. When Winthrop arrived, Sagamore John gave the colonists permission to build where they liked (according to Charlestown records), which they indeed did, many moving to Boston.

Winthrop himself settled in Charlestown which grew rapidly through the era of the Great Migration to a possible high of 15,000 colonists w communities in 1642. In 1633, the General Court, which had the d

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town bounds, granted to Charlestown some additional territory to the north, defined in 1636 as extending eight miles into the country.

In 1640, Charlestown was given even more territory, extending its boundaries to include present-day Winchester, Woburn, Burlington, and Wilmington. This area was surveyed in 1638, and lots of land were granted to men of Charlestown, as recorded in the Book of Possessions.

In 1640, the first buildings in Winchester territory, Edward Converse's house and grist mill, were built, and in the same year a committee was appointed to establish the bounds between Charlestown itself and a village. In 1642, the village, named Woburn, was established as the 12th town of the Bay Colony. At its south end a small settlement gradually developed around the early mills and tavern and became the core of the later town of Winchester.

The African slave trade began in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1637, a few years before any Englishman settled within Winchester boundaries. Up through the 1780s when the slave trade was abolished, very few households existed within those bounds. Large-scale slave-holding, such as practiced at Medford's Royall House, did not exist here. Nevertheless, slaves were present within Winchester's parent towns, Medford and Woburn.

Records are currently lacking to tell how residents of the area stood on abolition during the years leading up to the Civil War. A story about one Winchester man's activities in the 1860s suggests that residents held conflicting positions.

Reports in The Middlesex Journal indicate that during the war years the practice of slavery was being denounced. The men of the Winchester Literary Society, which ran a lyceum series, invited Frederick Do[illegible] speak in Winchester's Lyceum Hall in 1862. The hall was crowded and

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listened to with close attention, the audience occasionally heartily applauding some telling points.

It was not until after the Civil War, which broke out just a dozen years after Winchester was incorporated, that a free black presence in Winchester began to develop. While this was occurring, one resident's story reveals contempt for the Southern view of blacks.

Winchester's first African-American residents were often transitory. The first who settled here were reportedly welcomed into the community and enjoyed good reputations.

During the last decades of the 19th century, as other blacks moved from the South to Winchester, a community developed in the area of Swanton and Harvard streets. In 1893, they organized their own church, the Second Baptist Church, later called New Hope Baptist Church.

On parade in 1949, veterans of all ethnicities marched together in Winchester on Memorial Day. On entering the services during World War II, however, African-American servicemen were assigned to segregated units. COURTESY PHOTO/THE WINCHESTER ARCHIVAL CENTER

In some ways, African-Americans were assimilated into the town [illegible] were not fully integrated into the town. The children attended n[illegible] segregated schools, but sometimes they experienced difficulties fitting in.

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During the world wars, Winchester's African-Americans joined up. Particularly during World War II, entering the Army or Navy meant experiencing segregation practices not known at home.

By the end of the war, more blacks were leaving their home town. In 1958, a Dartmouth College study reported that "Negroes have left Winchester, and no one seems to be encouraging them to return."1 At the end of the 20th century, the number of Winchester's blacks was about one percent of the population (about 200 people).

During the 1960s and 1970s, Winchester was caught up in the national civil rights movement. Debates over participating in METCO, which proposed busing inner city black children to school in the suburbs to counter racial imbalance, divided residents. The resignation of a black teacher in 1978, rumored to be racially motivated, prompted more attention being given to equal opportunity and racial sensitivity.

Meanwhile, the First Congregational Church opened a pre-school nursery for children from Roxbury, and St. Mary's admitted black students as part of the archdiocese's equal education program. In 1971, Winchester joined "A Better Chance," a national nonprofit organization that provides academically talented scholars of color with expanded educational and career opportunities. Ten boys from every part of the country lived in the ABC house at 2 Dix Street. Through 2016, more than 85 scholars had graduated from Winchester High School.

SECOND AND THIRD WAVES OF IMMIGRATION

Nationwide, the second wave of immigration (c. 1820-1870), included Irish, Germans, Scandinavians, and Chinese. The Irish particularly impacted Winchester. The Port of Boston being a major center of immigra made their way into the suburbs, including Winchester. They intr

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not only ethnic diversity but also Roman-Catholicism into the Protestant town, provoking some opposition and controversies.

Irish had been around since at least the 1860s. At least 18 of the Civil War volunteers credited to Winchester were natives of Ireland. Most of the Irish during the early 20th century were Irish-American. Like the Canadians, the second largest component of English-speaking nationalities, the Irish were assimilated into the town more easily than immigrants not speaking English.

A gathering of the Winchester Sons of Italy. Italians, who came late in the third wave of immigration (c. 1880-1914), settled in the northern section of Winchester. COURTESY PHOTO/THE WINCHESTER ARCHIVAL CENTER

Many worked in construction and others in municipal service, especially the fire and police departments, and they were elected to town boards. Many of the Irish settled to the north of the town center, where there was once a Shamrock Street.

Italians, who came late in the third wave of immigration (c. 1880-1914), also settled in the northern section of town, along with the Irish and African-Americans. Early Italian immigrants worked on the farms but also found work in the factories or with industries which could use men with skills such as stone or leather working.

Although the whole community could enjoy the Feast of the Assumption celebrations, the Italians did not mix on an equal footing with the Yankees for many decades. Not until 1950 was a resident of Italian heritag to the Board of Selectmen.

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Though not as numerous as the Italians or Irish, another noteworthy nationality arrived in Winchester during the third wave, Russian Jewish refugees. Few of these families remained in Winchester beyond a second generation, their small presence pointing up a long-standing prejudice through the end of the twentieth century.

While many immigrants settled into communities within the town (mostly in areas known as The Plains and the North End), some found positions on household staffs, meaning a search for Winchester's diversity might easily take one to any street where domestic help was needed. Others were transient laborers, occasionally being recorded by a census or other record, adding to the ethnic mix, but soon moving on.

20TH CENTURY MIX

According to the 1900 census, the largest populations of foreign-born residents in Winchester were Irish, Canadian, English, Swedes, and Italians. Ten years later, the number of Italian-born had quadrupled, though Irish-born residents were twice as numerous. While the Irish and Italians continued to be large ethnic minorities, small numbers of other European nationalities appear in the censuses through 1940, but few numbered more than ten.

When World War II broke out, the ethnicity of Winchester service people ran through a wide range of nationalities – Scandinavian, Italian, Greek, Armenian, Turkish, and others – but all Americans.

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Asian people were few in Winchester until the end of the 20th-century. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a Chinese laundry in town. COURTESY PHOTO/THE WINCHESTER ARCHIVAL CENTER

Asian people were few in Winchester until the end of the 20th-century. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a Chinese laundry, but, according to one newspaper story, fear of competition kept others away.

Japanese residents were unknown through most of the 20th century. When the 21st century arrived, however, it was apparent that the Asian population was the fastest growing.

Dr. Ellen Knight, archivist for the Town of Winchester, is a local historian and journalist, as well as an independent scholar in Boston arts history.

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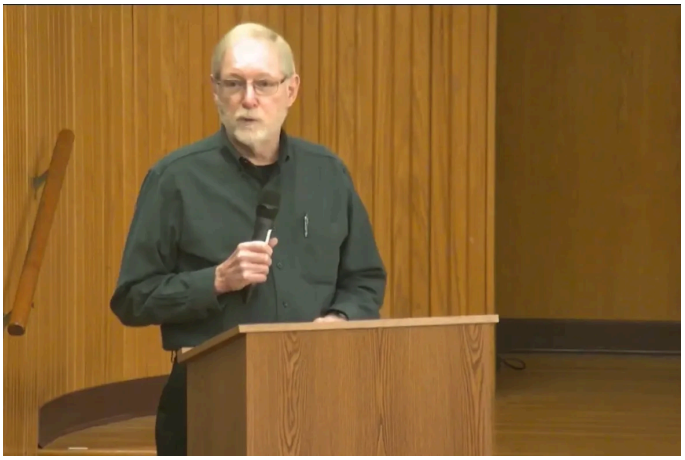

Winchester Celebrates 175th Anniversary • 1850-2025

The tale behind the saving of Charles Pressey's 'Village of Winchester'

BY NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

A phone call out of the blue set off a series of events in 2017 that led to the uncovering of a Winchester treasure that hadn't been seen in town for more than 40 years or perhaps even longer.

The call came from a friend of longtime resident Nancy Schrock, a member of the Historical Society, who told her a painting of the Old Converse Mill from Winchester was up for auction at Bonhams Skinner in Boston.

The painting was described as American School, 19th Century, unsigned, oil on academy board in a simple wood frame. Its condition was "surface grime."

The painting was estimated to sell between $400-$600.

"My first reaction was, 'Oh, it's wonderful!'" Schrock said. "My second reaction was to send it to Ellen Knight."

The town archivist gave it a good once over.

"She called me back and said, 'Nancy, this is our painting!'" Schrock said.

Enlisting the help of her husband, Richard, Schrock headed out to Boston to inform the auction house it was in possession of a painting belonging to the town. But the auction house needed more proof.

The back of the painting was removed, where a card was found

[sic] done before 1800." Schrock also noted a very faint watermark that read "Winchester Historical and Genealogical Society, Winchester, Mass."

the society as a pre... Pressey on July 4, 1889 in honor of her husband, artist Charles Pressey. E Pressey is believed to be Charles Pressey's wife, Elizabeth, one of the

"We knew it belonged to us," Schrock said, "but they would not stop the auction. They said we needed to do a lot

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FEATURES

Documentary reveals Winchester's close call with being named 'Harmony'

The Winchester Historical Society marked the town's 175th anniversary with the world premiere of "The Changing Shape of Winchester," a documentary examining how the community's boundaries evolved since its 1850 incorporation. Filmmaker Peter Engeldrum presented his latest work to a full house at the Jenks Center, concluding a

WILL DOWD | STAFF WRITER

November 28, 2025

175TH ANNIVERSARY

Winchester News' 175th Anniversary print edition

We hope everyone enjoyed our first foray into the world of print! Town Day, to be held on June 7 this year, will have some focus on the 175th Anniversary and the history of Winchester. Therefore, Winchester News is sponsoring a trolley tour covering some Winchester history that should dovetail

TARA HUGHES | STAFF WRITER

May 7, 2025

175TH ANNIVERSARY

Do you know the renowned residents of Winchester?

Winchester has been the home of many people who have won acclaim in their professional lives or participated with distinction in historic events. Below is a list of such individuals by category. Please contact the Archival Center for suggestions for further inclusions.
AERONAUTICS/AVIATION Jay Bayard Benton, aeronaut Paul Collins,

ELLEN KNIGHT | CORRESPONDENT

May 2, 2025

175TH ANNIVERSARY

Winchester Artists Network annual show honors town's 175 anniversary

The new art show being hung at the Winchester Public Library this week might be an annual event, but this year it comes with a twist. "We wanted to honor the 175th anniversary of Winchester," said Trish Gannon, a Winchester Artist Network member and participating artist. Gannon also serves on

CHRIS STEVENS | CORRESPONDENT

May 1, 2025

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MIND & MATTER

EVENTS

Celebrate Women's History Month with Girls Leading Change

The following was submitted by the Network for Social Justice: To mark Women's History Month and International Women's Day in 2026, the Network for Social Justice is collaborating with club leaders from Winchester High School and members of the Community Health team from La Colaborativa in Chelsea and

March 4, 2026

NEWS

Winchester School Committee candidates bring contrasting backgrounds to Thursday forum

Two candidates for Winchester's School Committee will face voters at a forum as the district navigates a new literacy curriculum, budget pressures and questions about student mental health. Heather von Mering and John Bellaire are competing for an open seat on the School Committee, which oversees a budget von

WILL DOWD | STAFF WRITER

March 4, 2026

FEATURES

'Chicago: Teen Edition' dances onto the Winchester High School

EVENTS

Ripley Chapel in Wi presents 'Syldason: You Are

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stage

By Talia Ho | Correspondent Fame. Fortune. And all that jazz. This spring, Winchester High School presents “Chicago: Teen Edition,” a bold musical that explores celebrity culture, media manipulation, and the cost of ambition. Set in the 1920s, this iconic production is sure to leave the audience wanting more. Performances will

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS
March 4, 2026

Welcome Here’

The following was submitted by the Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church: On Friday, March 13, beginning at 7:30 p.m., live in-person and live streamed from the stunning Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church, Winchester, 21 Church St., join in with Syldason, a duo concert featuring Sylvie Zakarian,

March 4, 2026

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